

# Fighting Poverty with Facts

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## Cambodia pits data against poverty

*Current, accurate data about poverty in Cambodian communes is a valuable asset. Not only can the commune councils better meet the needs of their citizens, they can enlist the help of donors to solve pressing problems.*

In the dusty late afternoon sunshine, a small group of children have gathered to play along the shallow irrigation canal that separates Kbal Snuol village from the fallow rice fields. They are, they say, 6, 8, 9, and 11 years old. “Do you go to school?” Yes. “What grade are you in?” One.

Despite their different ages, all are in first grade because, until recently, there was no school in the area. There was no road to the town either, just a dirt trail.

Remote Kratie province in Cambodia’s northeast is one of the country’s poorest. Almost all residents are subsistence farmers in the highlands or fishers along the Mekong River: 30% of households live on less than US\$0.50 per day. The red soil is largely planted to cassava and pepper trees, mainly for export, and to rubber plantations. The once abundant forests are falling to logging, much of it illegal.

### Tangible benefits

The new primary school and library are tangible outcomes of a community-based poverty monitoring system (CBMS), piloted in Kbal Snuol, as well as in 20 other villages of three Kratie province communes: Snuol, Khsuem, and Srae Char — more than 6500 households in all. CBMS, developed as part of research initially supported by Canada’s International Development Research Centre to determine micro impacts of macroeconomic and adjustment policies, was also implemented in the more affluent Battambang and Kampong Thom provinces, for a total of 22 300 households in 109 villages.



Snuol Commune Chief Vann Doeurn (left) reviews survey results with Kim Sea, CBMS provincial coordinator, Noun Nisaykosol, national CBMS coordinator, and Try Sothearith, Deputy Director of Cambodia’s National Institute of Statistics and CBMS project leader.

As Snuol Commune Chief Vann Doeurn points out, the irrigation canal itself is a result of CBMS that provided “a lot of data from a lot of sectors. From that we have made a very good plan for the commune. CBMS showed how many hectares of paddy rice fields there were — from that we could plan irrigation. This plan is getting support from the Department of Water and Meteorology.”

“We also found how many villages were far from the main road and so decided to build new roads from village to village.” Two roads now link Kbal Snuol to the highway. In rural Cambodia, a road is often, quite literally, the route to a better life.

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A health centre has also been built and plans are underway to provide medicines and vaccines against the most common diseases — malaria and dengue, for instance, are widespread in Kratie. Toilet facilities are also planned as the survey showed that only 14% of the households had access to sanitation. In addition, discovering how many households were landless led to a program to provide them with free land.

## About CBMS

The Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) is an organized way of collecting, analyzing, and verifying information at the local level to be used by local governments, national government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and civil society for planning, budgeting, and implementing local development programs. It also serves to monitor and evaluate their performance. Piloted in the Philippines in 1994, it is now being implemented in 14 countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

## From planning to action

Vann Doeurn is describing these achievements during a meeting of Snuol, Khsuem, and Srae Char Commune Councils, gathered to present the findings — and outcomes — from CBMS surveys carried out in 2004 and 2006. Sitting in the open hall, they take turns at the microphone to describe how the surveys have served their communities' planning needs. In one commune, data on the high rate of malaria led to a malaria education program: the Department of Health then distributed mosquito nets. In another commune, wells have been dug. The data has also been used by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to plan health, education, women's programs, and other projects, as well as by provincial government departments.



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In Kbal Snuol village, the survey results have led to new roads, a primary school, and a health centre.

Some findings have been surprising. In one commune of Battambang Province, for instance, the data showed that children in school suffered from dengue more often than children who did not attend. Why? Children forced to remain sitting still at desks are easy prey for dengue-carrying mosquitoes.

The data has also enabled villagers to better deal with some of their own problems. For instance, the relatively high number of cases of domestic violence in one village led to education and deterrence programs for offenders. Bringing the problem out into the open has led to a dramatic reduction in cases of violence.

## Implementing CBMS in Cambodia

Cambodia joined the CBMS network in 2003 when a survey was piloted in six communes of Kratie and Battambang provinces. Try Sothearith, Deputy Director of the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) Department of Demographic Statistics, Census and Survey, explains that, at the time, commune databases existed, but the information they contained was largely garnered from administrative reports completed by the village chief, without household visits. Moreover, the databases set up under the *Seila* program were to close in 2005.

Drawing on the experience of other Southeast Asian countries where CBMS had been established, and with the assistance of the CBMS Network Coordinating Team, a core set of nine indicators was developed. Canada's International Development Research Centre supports the CBMS network.

The CBMS involved all levels of government. School teachers and other knowledgeable villagers were recruited and trained as enumerators. Village chiefs worked with the enumerators in listing households and mapping villages. Commune councils supervised the survey teams and data processing, helping to ensure their buy-in. District and provincial statistical offices handled data cleaning and coding as well as data entry. Finally, the NIS research team analyzed the data, wrote reports, and disseminated the results. Under the NIS, a second census of 12 communes was carried out in 2006.

According to CBMS project leader Sothearith, "The project yielded valuable results in terms of adequately describing the different facets of poverty in the pilot communes and in building the capacities of local authorities." It also successfully promoted links between the commune, provincial, and national level planning processes. These are impressive results, he says, given that the cost of \$50 000 to survey more than 22 000 households is a fraction of the cost of other surveys.

The communes in which CBMS has been tested are envied by others. "Hearing from communes with CBMS, I noted that they developed all sectors of their communes," says one councillor. "There has been no progress in our villages for more than two years."

More important is that the detailed data obtained from the surveys had enabled them to develop annual and five-year plans for all sectors. The goal, says a councillor, is to eliminate poverty in the commune. This is a goal shared by the villagers who supported the CBMS implementation

## National support and need

It is also shared by the national government. In 1996, the Royal Government of Cambodia devolved power from the centre to provincial and district levels as a means of improving the delivery of services and to strengthen the state's regulatory functions. A joint government-donor program was launched in support of the reform. Called *Seila*, a Khmer word meaning cornerstone, the program was also intended to promote democracy and reduce poverty.

*Seila* also aimed to encourage greater participation in local decision-making. To do so, it called for the creation of communes as legal entities. Since the first commune elections in 2002, communes receive an annual budgetary allocation from the central government with which to build roads and other infrastructure. They also receive funds from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility for other poverty-reducing activities.

What is funded through the national programs is included in the commune development plan: priority goes to the poorest people and communities. But, according to H.E. Ouk Chay, Secretary of State, Ministry of Planning, "we still have difficulty identifying who and where are the poor. What do the poor need? They don't need the same thing throughout the country." From the CBMS data, he says, we can identify poor households and target them. The ministry has adopted CBMS, he says, to help direct interventions more effectively, as well as to monitor development activities. The challenge, however, is how to scale up. The National Institute of Statistics (NIS), under the Ministry of Planning, implements CBMS.

CBMS is also important because it helps build the capacity of the commune council, especially in methodology for data collection and processing, declares H.E. Ouk Chay.

## Meeting statistical needs

CBMS has grown rapidly in Cambodia, both in terms of enabling lower levels of government to participate more effectively in development planning through the decentralized political and governance structure and in terms of



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**"We need the CBMS for all communes", says H.E. Kham Phoeurn, Governor of Kratie Province.**

matching the aspirations of the NIS to collect data at the commune level in a cost-effective way.

The development of statistics is still in its infancy in Cambodia, but it is now a national priority, reflected in the 2005 Statistics Law and 2007 Statistical Master Plan that recognizes that quality statistical information to allow the monitoring of government activities is critical for improving governance. But despite external funding to improve the country's statistical system and data, resources for this work are limited, particularly given increasing demands.

"Based on the Statistics Law and Plan, we will have a statistical officer in each commune," says H.E. San Sy Than, Director-General of NIS. "But not yet," he adds, "because of the budget."

Statistical officers would make it easier to implement CBMS nationwide, he says. He has also proposed that a CBMS bureau be established within the NIS to promote the system throughout the country and to build capacity among statistical officers and local communes. "NIS implementation is a guarantee of quality," he says. "It makes it official, more acceptable."

## An essential tool

The call for extending CBMS coverage is also coming from provincial and district levels. H.E. Kham Phoeurn, Governor of Kratie Province, complains that the coverage has so far been too limited. "We need the CBMS for all communes or at least for entire districts," he says. He is committed to extending the system to the remaining two communes of Snuol district, an area with particular development needs. He has also agreed to provide counterpart funding (some US\$10 000) if the CBMS can be extended to the entire province. "I think," he says, "that if there is no data, there is no governance. And if there is no governance, there is no development."



While designed as a local-level tool to serve local planning purposes, CBMS in Cambodia is permeating all levels of government. The data is being uploaded to provincial and national websites. Census data at the commune level has been integrated into the national statistical system and included in the annual statistical yearbook. It has also been used to prepare maps and monitor Cambodia's progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

But it is at the commune level that the benefits are most tangible. The uses of the CBMS data are many: Soth Chy, member of the Preak Luong council, Ek Phnom District, Battambang, says it was used to prove to donors that they needed roads and other infrastructure. One NGO provided 14 toilets and promised more, he says, in addition to 250 water containers. Tube wells and pumps, schools, roads, water and sanitation projects, irrigation, and a police officer, as well as less visible benefits — literacy programs, education programs to improve hygiene, to fight domestic violence, to assist the disabled — all have accrued to the participating communities.

"Before we compiled the results of CBMS, we just waited for development partners to come to help the commune," says one councillor. "CBMS is a clear measurement tool," says another. "No other instrument provides actual rates. No one can challenge this data."



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Labels applied to houses identify households that have been surveyed.

*This case study was written by Michelle Hibler, senior writer at IDRC.*

*The views expressed in this case study are those of IDRC-funded researchers and of experts in the field.*

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